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Impact Strategist Amirah Jiwa on Why There's No Such Thing as a Truly Sustainable Business

noissue has launched a podcast! Here, we chat with impact strategist Amirah Jiwa about why there's no such thing as perfection, and only progress, when it comes to sustainability.

By Elly Strang — 14 October, 2021

Amirah Jiwa is a social impact and sustainability strategist who helps brands define what sustainability means to them and meaningfully act on it by creating and communicating impact. She has worked on impact strategy with brands such as Sephora and MailChimp.

Amirah says there's no such thing as a truly sustainable business, because where brands go wrong is thinking sustainability is something that you are when it's actually something that you do – which means there is constant room for improvement.

In this episode, you'll learn how to communicate impact instead of buzzwords as a brand, Amirah's top

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Find more of Amirah Jiwa: Check out her website.
Read her work: Beyond the Buzzwords: How to Communicate Impact as a Brand and Conscious Consumption 101

Why There's No Such Thing as a Truly Sustainable Business With Impact Strate...

🎧 Full Podcast Transcript Below

Amirah: I'm good, thanks. Thank you so much for having me. I'm excited to be here.

Elly: You're so welcome to be here! And to get the ball rolling, and we try to get to know you a little bit better first. And the question I usually ask is, what's a fun fact about you that not many people know. And the thing is, I've already discovered a treasure trove of fun facts about you from your website. So one that I definitely want to bring up is that you have a tradition of celebrating your birthday by eating the age you're turning in ice cream. Are you still doing this tradition?

Amirah: I know. It's kind of ridiculous. I started when I was eight years old, and then just kept going every year and it feels like I can't just stop. So yes, I'm still doing it. My birthday is actually coming up next month. So I'm going to be eating 28 ice creams, hopefully.

Elly: 28 is impressive, that's like a full shift.

Amirah: I know, I'm going to try and do it forever. I'm just going to slowly shrink the size of the ice cream. I'm not gonna cut the number down. So like when I'm 90 hopefully, if I make it there, I'm gonna have like 90 tiny ice creams.

Elly: Yeah, hopefully they've invented really nutritious ice creams by that point and it can just be your meals throughout the day.

Amirah: I know, I try not to think about that too much. My sister is a doctor and like, as my birthday comes up, as I start preparing for this, she's like, this is terrible you can't do this to yourself, and I'm like, well it's just one day a year, surely it's fine. I don't know. I try not to think about that side too much.

Elly: Yeah, one out of 365 days is fine to treat yourself, I reckon.

Amirah: It's a little indulgent, just a little.

Elly: And I also read that you traveled to and lived in 26 cities in 2019. So what was your favorite city? And have you been keeping up your travel plans, or has COVID-19 put a bit of a stop to that?

Amirah: Yeah, 2019 was a big year. So I was living in New York, and then moved to Mumbai and moved to London and then moved to Addis Ababa. So it was like one of my most international years so far, I've always travelled a bit. I don't know if I could pick. I don't know that I could pick a favorite city, I think that's a bit of a cop out. But I think for me, it was like those four cities, those cities that I was actually based in and lived in. I think it was like the combination of the four of them, like the differences between them. The fact that I got to experience all of them in one year was really exciting. And then 2020, I spent pretty much all not just in London, but in one room in London, I think maybe a couple of days outside of that room, thanks to COVID-19, so it was a pretty different year.

Elly: I'm sure a lot of people in the UK have had that experience.

Amirah: This year, 2021, I'm in Amsterdam at the moment because my husband lives here. And so I'll be back and forth between outside and London. I don't expect that I'll be traveling much beyond that for now.

Elly: Yeah, because noissue's community is spread out across the globe, so we'd like to get a sense of where everyone's currently residing. So what's great about Amsterdam, for people that haven't been there?

an anonymous kind of one in millions in London. So I guess yeah, it's got that the combination of a big city and small neighborhood feel.

Elly: That's really nice. And if you weren't a social impact and sustainability strategists what industry or job do you think you'd be working in?

Amirah: That's an interesting one. I feel like I could be doing honestly so many different things. The kind of career that I wish I had sometimes, but I've never actually done anything towards, I just love the hospitality space, like owning a cafe or a restaurant or even a small boutique hotel. Like I think that would just be fantastic. But obviously, you know, still maintaining sustainable principles and in mind, something to do with Yeah, like that space and experience sector would be really dreamy. And maybe there's time yet. We'll see.

Elly: What about an ice cream chef?

Amirah: I like the eating more than the cooking. Like, I just love food so much and I'm a terrible cook. So I would like to be an ice cream chef if my ice cream is really good and if I continue to enjoy it all the time, but sometimes I think seeing how things are made takes some magic out of them and makes you enjoy it less.

Elly: Very true actually.

Amirah: I wouldn't want to ruin the ice cream for me. If I saw how much sugar went into, for example, like would I be able to consume 28, 29 on my birthday? Maybe not.

Elly: And I want to take us back in time for a second as well. So the year is 2000, Big Brother has just just debuted on television, Harry Potter and the Goblet of Fire book has just been released. y2k is a theory that has just been debunked as well. Sustainability wasn't a concept on many people's radars back then. So do you think your job would have existed 20 years ago?

Amirah: You know, I don't think my job in this exact form would have necessarily existed but similar work, whether it was called corporate social responsibility, or corporate partnerships, or just businesses making some kind of impact in the world, I think has always been around the the kind of framing for it has just evolved over time. So this specific role that I do, and maybe the variety of industries that I get to work with, and the fact that I get to work with a lot of independent brands and small businesses, maybe maybe that wouldn't have existed. But I do think even though, you know, sustainability, the term might not have been a buzzword back then the concept of thinking about the impact that you're making in a world is not really a new one.

Elly: And going forward from that with the progression of social impact and sustainability in the business world, we've had movements of corporate social responsibility and social enterprises. So what kind of stage are we at now? What's the next wave?

Amirah: So the way that I like to think about it, there's probably loads of different frameworks and terms that people have come up with, but the way that I like to think about it is that probably two decades ago, we had impact as an add on. So that's when you saw a lot of philanthropic work, a lot of corporate social responsibility, you know, big businesses did try to make an impact in some way. But it was very separate from their regular business activities, and it was usually kind of just like siloed to a different team. So that was kind of impact as an add on, then, we started having kind of like aligned impact, that's what

the business. But then we had integrated impact. And I think that's really where we are today, a lot of businesses are thinking, we actually need our business model, the things that we do have to have an impact associated with it. So our product needs to be slightly better, or, you know, like the way that we deliver our product, or the way that we sell it, that let's make sure that those things that are really core to our businesses is integrated and makes an impact.

So I think noissue probably falls right into that category, like with the products that you're selling, like you're selling sustainability, or an option of an ability to be more sustainable to kind of add all the businesses that you supply to. And I think you know, this is a pretty good place to be like, it's exciting, the impact has integrated more into businesses. But I think where we're heading next is more of an idea of really holistic impact. So you're thinking even beyond the one specific way that your business does good to just being a great place to work making sure that you kind of have all your ducks in a row, and you've laid a strong foundation for impact across the board. So you're not just thinking about is my product made of recycled materials? Or do I have a circular business model? But have I considered Diversity, Equity and Inclusion is in the place that I work and do my employees want to work here? Do we have great retention? Are we investing in our local communities? Are we making our consumers' lives better, just thinking kind of beyond that single point of impact that maybe businesses have integrated into their models at the moment.

Elly: That's really exciting. And I just wanted to backtrack as well, because there is a bit of confusion around the language used to describe a brand's impact. So it'd be great to hear your perspective, breaking down in simple terms, what looking at social impact and sustainability actually means in a business?

Amirah: Yeah, I think it's tricky. These days. I call myself a social impact and sustainability strategist. So people know what I do but really the way I like to think about it is just impact strategist, because it's just about thinking, what is the impact that your business has on the world? That might be good? Hopefully, it's good, it might be neutral, maybe it's bad. So it's what is the broader impact of your business, and the words sustainable, ethical, conscious, these are all great words. And they, you know, they sound like they mean something, but to be honest, they don't anymore, because that's super broad, like what does conscious mean? You just, you know, think about things and you're a little bit more intentional, that's great. But you can also be intentional, and in a bad way, to be honest, the idea of calling a business truly sustainable, is really tricky and has always been tricky, because, you know, very few businesses are actually inherently sustainable, like most of them do consume more than they give back. They're takers more than givers. And that's not like a bad thing, because businesses maybe aren't meant to be totally sustainable in the true meaning of that word. So when I think about brands and how they should talk about their impact these days, I think specificity is key: what is the impact that we're making in the world? and describe that? Like? Is it through your materials? Is it through living wages? Is it through the benefits and like the flexibility and the inclusivity that you offer your team? Don't use these big umbrella terms that could be defined in so many different ways, and just explain what you're doing that is slightly better than what you think is normal. And that's how we should be talking about sustainability and social impact.

Elly: Yeah, because the mic drop moment I've seen you speak about is how there's no such thing as a sustainable business, which I think would be a really new idea to a lot of people aspiring to be one. And you've also talked about how sustainability is more of a lens to overlay across your processes rather than an end goal. So can you expand on that a little bit by what you mean?

themselves either ethical or sustainable. And they might have a few things to back that up. But again, the term is meaningless. It's really about saying, look, I'm committed, as a business owner, or as someone who acts for business and what my role is, to doing things slightly better and to reducing negative impacts, increasing positive impacts day on day. Like, I do sustainability. I'm constantly thinking about it, there's always room for improvement. And there isn't some end goal pinnacle, because I think the businesses that are doing sustainability right, They do view it as a journey, and something where the goalposts are constantly moving. And that can feel really intimidating. But it's actually really exciting to know that you are only really competing against yourself when it comes to impact. Can you do better than what you were doing the year before or the week before the day before? versus here's this end goal, we check all these boxes and then we've crossed a bar that means we're a sustainable business versus one that isn't.

Elly: Yeah, do you think with getting around that kind of broad use of language, a lot of people are throwing around, it's good to actually go to the legitimate certifications, rather than saying I'm ethical and sustainable and not really backing it up?

Amirah: I think certifications definitely have an important role. I think that they can help businesses that maybe don't know what to do or where to start, or what to do to guide that process. And they do add a seal of approval, I think one that's really popular will become increasingly popular amongst lots of independent brands, the B Corp certification, which is kind of like an all-round certification, but I don't think that you need to be certified to be a business that is trying to do better, and that is doing better. It's about being really careful and looking at all of your impacts and looking to reduce them over time. Certification can be an expensive process, especially for small businesses. The actual requirements for any given certification might not align and be the most relevant to what you do. So it's an important role, it's great to to use certification process as a tool to know how to do better and to know where to focus your efforts, but they're not the be all, end all. Ultimately, a business can communicate the impact that is making that a positive without a certification, or if they're transparent and candid and know what they're talking about, that will come through.

Elly: Yeah, that's really good to know. Because yes, certifications are out of reach for quite a lot of small businesses as well due to the time and money aspect.

Amirah: A lot of time, it can be really bureaucratic. So I'd say if you're thinking about a certification, just look to see what the requirements are and use them as a guidance. Organic is an interesting one, you're certifying products, rather than necessarily businesses. But there's a lot of growers and farmers out there who say, like, we use organic practices, but we can't go through the burden of certification. So I think I think that's a real issue and try and focus more on the impact and less on the certification, if that's all that's not possible for you.

Elly: Yeah, something we see quite often at noissue is this hesitancy from people to start on a deeper sustainability journey beyond packaging, because there's that pressure they feel to do it perfectly. So what would be your advice to them on where to start? Or how to measure their progress in other areas?

Amirah: There's no such thing as perfect when it comes to sustainability, right? Like, take a brand that everyone looks at as like a pinnacle for responsible business, like Patagonia. Even they will admit that they are not doing everything right, there is always room for improvement. And so that's exactly the reason that you should feel comfortable with all of the gaps that you might have to kind of improve on

any, brands that are doing everything right, any brand that is pretending that they've done everything right, is probably greenwashing. And I think it's really helpful to actually say, this is how far we've gotten. And this is where we know we've got to go and be transparent about that. Consumers are getting more and more informed every day. And I think there was a lot of excitement around ethical consumption, conscious consumption, wanting to buy from brands that all right, and so expecting to see lots and lots and lots of information, or lots of boxes checked, but I think consumers are catching up to and they know that it's not possible if you're if you're doing things right, like there's always going to be more to do. So just be candid and explain this is how far we've gotten, we know we're not perfect.

Elly: So when the companies are setting impact goals and making statements about the changes they're going to make, what are some of your tips and tricks to get the communications right? Because we talked about just before, what point they start taking their customers on this journey with them?

Amirah: So I think when it comes to communicating goals, the first bit is like actually setting the goals and setting realistic goals. I think that's the thing is there's a lot of pressure these days to set really ambitious targets and to maybe even set a goal before you even know how you're going to accomplish it. So I think the first thing is actually focused on communicating your baseline, like where are we, where you can go into detail there first, that's the first step, it's okay to spend a lot of time just saying, this is where we are. This is the work that we've already done, to even figure out this baseline information. Find out what your initial carbon footprint is, we'll track down your suppliers and naturally know who your secondary tertiary suppliers are. So don't kind of stumble over that and act as if it wasn't a big deal. It's okay to spend the time being like we've actually just spent a lot of time figuring out where we are and what our initial impact is. Then when it comes to setting targets, make them realistic and make sure you have a plan for actually figuring out how to meet them. So don't just set a net zero target. If you have no way of knowing how you're going to reduce your carbon emissions, or if you think you're just gonna buy offsets to offset them. And then in terms of communicating them be specific. So don't just say like, we're gonna have zero impact by 2030, or by 2025, or whatever it is. Be human about it, it's okay, these are not small things, they're exciting. And I think there's a lot of pressure sometimes to try and make what you're doing seem like you're the first person doing something, or you're doing the most of something. And that's just unrealistic, especially if you're a smaller business, especially if you're an independent brand, just explain simply the changes that we're making, whether it's, "We are going to make our packaging slightly smaller, so that we're reducing our shipping footprint overall" or "We're going to be making switches to some of our key materials." It's okay to kind of be open, transparent and human about your progress here.

Elly: Yeah, can you run into any problems being too transparent in this process?

Amirah: I personally think there's like no such thing as too transparent, transparency will always be rewarded. I think the tricky thing is when you pretend you're being more transparent than you actually are. So don't make claims which you're not actually sure about, which is why I think a lot of the initial work that businesses need to do is less about figuring out how to make a better impact, or make less of a negative impact and more about what is our actual impact it even when you're running a business, it is really tricky to know what goes into your product, like what is actually like the impact of everything that you use. So spend that time figuring that out, because you can't be transparent about things that you don't know. So I'd say there's probably no such thing as too transparent. Because by the time you find all of that information out, you're going to want to do something about it. And I do think that consumers will appreciate all of that.

Amirah: I think it all comes back to the same point, which is like, there's no such thing as perfect. Like, there's not a perfect business when it comes to sustainability. And there's also not a perfect choice. A lot of choices when it comes to impact do have trade-offs, you know, you probably see this with packaging a lot. Sometimes it might make sense to use a more environmentally harmful material because of the performance qualities that it has. And how well it will protect your product, or how well how long it will make your product last like that. And I think it's about understanding those trade offs. And knowing that you've made that decision consciously or intentionally, right. In terms of brands being holistic, I do think a holistic approach is possible, because that's just about making sure that you're considering the impacts on all of these stakeholder groups. So while you may not be able to pick a solution that works perfectly for everyone, at least you will have been able to consider all those options and you're making sure that you haven't just totally ignored your impact on animals or totally ignored the impact on your workers and your supply chain. It's important to make sure that you've actually looked into it, you understand what the impact is, and you understand the trade-offs that you're making. Because trade offs are being made. Any brand that thinks like we found the perfect material. It's absolutely wonderful. There's nothing wrong with it. Sorry, I just feel like a lot of my work is just like bursting bubbles. Which is really sad when they're really excited to like, just do everything right. And I'm like, sorry, it's not possible, you're not gonna get everything perfect. But ultimately, I do think that that approach is what makes sustainability more accessible because it's just like any other function in the company, right? Like you have to make decisions. Sometimes those decisions like if you're stuck between two that aren't great, but one will make slightly more sense for your business.

Elly: So I'm sure most people listening to this business owner or not want to consume more consciously in everyday life. So how do we differentiate good businesses from good marketing and be more savvy as shoppers?

Amirah: Look for specificity. Can a brand answer questions? Is it providing enough detailed information? I think if they're just saying we pay our workers fair wages, is there any more information that backs that up? look for evidence, basically, of any claim being made. It's tricky on the business side to be fully transparent and to understand every element of your supply chain and every impact that your business has, so also be generous with with businesses. It's not about if someone can't provide this information that means they're totally terrible, but to separate the greenwashing from the people that are making a really meaningful impact, I think it's just about looking for very specific information, don't look for one that I see often is just like, look like we use sustainable materials. That's not good enough, I want to know what the actual material is. So just go one level beyond the claim.

Elly: What are some examples of brands that have raised the bar for what sustainability and business can look like?

Amirah: For me, I think the idea of holistic impact is important. And so considering your impact across all bases, one business that I really liked in this regard is Sweet Green, the American salad chain. So they're a business that has thought really carefully about their impacts across the board. They think about it when it comes to sourcing the ingredients that they use in their salad. They think about it when it comes to the actual stores like the materials they build in their stores, the packaging that they use for their products, the way that they compensate, promote and hire like the teams that work in their stores. They also make local community impacts through school, like working with schools and within food deserts. I actually don't even like salad. I'm more of a pizza ice cream person, but I do really like Sweet Green as a

But there are plenty of brands that use recycled nylon for their products. So Girlfriend Collective use recycled polyester, but they're not the only one that's doing that. But they were one of the first to make that entire product line full of recycled materials. They think also about the factories that they work with. They have also been really inclusive and representative and the marketing like the people that they show that product, on the variety of people that they sell to the colors that they use, the sizes that they offer. And like that they're working on consumer education. So they know that there are issues with that product, it's not perfect. They know that even though they're using recycled materials, ultimately, that products when washed will really release micro-plastics. So they don't shy away from that. They're not saying like, look our products are perfect. Even though we're doing something right, we know that there's still issues with the way that these products might be used. They sell washing machine filters and other products to help you mitigate those impacts as a consumer. So I think that's a great example of a brand that is a smaller business, although it's grown a bit now, has been thinking holistically about their impact, and also owns up the kind of shortcomings of their product and acknowledges a trade off.

Elly: For those who haven't invested in sustainability or social impact, yet, why do it now? What will it mean for the future success of the brand?

Amirah: That's a fair question to ask, but I don't even know if that needs to be answered any more. Because I think it's really clear, right? Any business knows these days that people in general care about climate change. We do care about our impacts on other people. And the people who are starting businesses know that you know it as a consumer, and you have a higher bar for what you expect of companies. And even if you don't, if you're one of those few people that really doesn't care and you're just in it for profit, you will recognize that consumers are expecting more of you. So I don't think it's a super progressive or exciting thing to do anymore, it's becoming a bit more of a tablestakes activity. And while that's sad because there's fewer opportunities for a brand to differentiate itself based on an impact, I think it's great for people that work in the space that have wanted to see the bar pushed forward, where doing good and being conscious and aware of your impact in the world and looking to do better is seen as like something that's totally necessary in the same way that like having a social media account is investing in your brand.

Elly: And I think also another point is, it does make your business more resilient to the changes the world is facing right going forward. So it just makes total sense as well, to future proof your business.

Amirah: It is absolutely necessary to future proof. I don't want to sugarcoat it just because it's becoming increasingly common doesn't yet mean it's easy, more sustainable materials, more ethical practices like those things can cost money, they can cost more time, they can cost more energy, but they are becoming the norm. And so if you do not think about those things now, you will be forced to think about them in a few year's time. You might as well be ahead of the game, or be at the center of the pack, rather than playing catch up later on.

Elly: Totally. And we've been discussing a lot of in-depth topics, so where can people go to educate themselves further on the stuff we're talking about? Where would you recommend?

Amirah: Ooh, that's a good question. I think with sustainability and social impact, things are changing all the time. So I don't recommend a textbook or a book, I think sites like Fast Company that don't just focus on sustainable news – it's not just about ethical businesses or anything like that. They're an innovation site that's constantly showcasing what companies are doing around these topics. And that's a

that international network of people around the world, you will have a great network of people just because all of the businesses that you work with have decided to invest in more sustainable packaging.

Elly: Yeah, and that's why we wanted to drill down on these topics as well, because we as a business use the term sustainability all the time. So yeah, talking to different businesses, different experts about what they actually think it means and how brands can apply it is really important for us as well.

Amirah: The language we use constantly changes, and I think it made sense to use the word sustainable or sustainability as a differentiator for a really long time because most businesses weren't thinking about these kinds of things. But now a lot of businesses are, so we need to just get a bit more precise and specific about the language that we're using. But it's an exciting time to be thinking about the impact of your business, just because there's so much information out there. Compared to most functions, or areas of business, it's a collaborative space to be in, if your competitor has a really sustainable packaging option that you might don't have, you might be surprised, people might be willing to share this information because people who've thought consciously about their impact want other people to level up as well. So it's not like marketing or advertising, where everyone's really protective of their campaign ideas. I found personally that people are willing to really share in the space, and to educate and to inform. So if I recommend if you have a business, and you've seen another business in your industry that's slightly more impactful, you could reach out and ask them. I'm not saying that definitely will tell you what they're doing, but that they might be willing to help because we're ultimately we're all in this together, this being the state of the world.

Elly: Yeah, I'm just thinking as an example, off the top of my head, was it Allbirds that created some sort of new material and just opened it up for use for everyone, they even went to some of the bigger footwear brands like Adidas to take it and use it for all of their products? So that protective mindset was not there. They were like, it's a free for all, we just want to get this out and create change.

Amirah: Yeah, that's a recent example. But to be honest, in social impact, and sustainability, this has been happening for a while, like a lot of the big industry initiatives that you see started off as a single corporate initiative. Like maybe they developed a toolkit or a set of standards, and then rolled it out and decided we need other people to be involved. Two competitors who are leather footwear handbag brands based in the US ,one is called Abl, and the other one is called Nisolo. They partner together, even though their competitors serving a pretty similar market to start sharing their lowest wage, like a campaign for sharing the lowest wage. So there's a lot of examples of open sourcing initiatives, frameworks and collaboration between competitors when it comes to this kind of thing.

Elly: That's really inspiring to see. And my final question for you is how do you measure and define the impact of your work? So what does success look like to you?

Amirah: Ooh that's a really, really good question. I think it's not quantitative at all right? Like, I've advocated for maybe a more human way of thinking about your impact of your business. And I think it's the same for the impact of my work. Like, if I can help any business or any entrepreneur feel more confident in their ability to think carefully about their impacts, and to do something slightly better. I love working with all brands. And of course, it's really exciting to work for a super mission driven brand that already knows what to do and how to do it. But I think where I feel the most impact is from businesses that feel like they can't do sustainability. They're intimidated by it, they have no idea where to begin. And if I can get them on their way and help them go down a route where they feel like they know it's a journey, and they're on their way. That's always going to feel really good.

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